

Spring 1955: the Corps agreed to reinstate the project to active status and to recommend construction of those elements that were individually and economically justified, but the announcement of that decision was mysteriously misplaced. Newt Graham vowed to “blast loose” the report, and Kerr was notified on April 26, 1955, that the total project was again active. Exactly what actions Kerr had taken are not known, but Graham wrote to thank him “for restoring the Arkansas to the living.”¹³

By 1957 — the year that Sputnik propelled the U.S. into a frenzy of faith in technology over all odds — Gen. Itschner, the waterway opponent and by this time Chief of Engineers, had relented and promised Kerr that he would push the project as fast as possible.¹⁴

In the Eric Bottoms’ restudy, the benefit-to-cost ratio had come up to a respectable 1.2 to 1.0. The Chief of Engineers recommended that bank stabilization begin immediately and that work proceed on the first of three principal upstream dams — the Oologah Dam on the Verdigris northeast of Tulsa.

Opposition swelled

AGAINST THE OOLOGAH

project, which one critic charged “was conceived in iniquity and born in sin.” Those opposed argued that the lake would flood productive farmland and oilfields.

Worst of all, they said, it would flood the birthplace of Claremore humorist Will Rogers. This was inadvertent poetic justice, because it was Rogers who contended in the ’30s it would be cheaper to pave the Arkansas River than to build the waterway.

The on-again, off-again construction of Oologah Dam spanned 1950 to 1951, 1955 to 1963, and 1967 to 1974, reflecting in part whether opponents or proponents were in political power. It was, said reporter Joe Howell, the “acid test” of navigation support. Some observers blamed Oologah when, in 1950, opponent Mike Monroney defeated Oklahoma’s powerful Senator Elmer Thomas — although Thomas, in fact, had other political problems and wavered in his own support of Oologah.¹⁵

As late as 1954 Mike Monroney was arguing that the Oologah was undesirable and unnecessary for flood control. But Monroney swung to the side of support in 1955 when the City of Tulsa agreed — after a six-year campaign by Tulsa’s Chamber of Commerce — to buy water supply storage in Oologah Lake.

Kerr, meanwhile, was well on his way to earning his title of “uncrowned king of the Senate.”¹⁶ He had an iron grip on power in Washington as chairman of the flood control subcommittee of the Senate Public Works Committee, which he also later chaired. He was in a key position to react strongly to President Eisenhower’s budget-cutting “no new starts policy” and to the President’s proposed 1956 budget that included no funds for Oologah, Keystone, or Eufaula Dams. These three upstream dams were key to the navigation project, but the Chief of Engineers was holding up funds until engineering problems with the silt were resolved.¹⁷

Kerr traded his vote for the new \$27.5 billion federal interstate program in exchange for waterway support, and Congress reinstated funds for the dams — although they were still opposed by the Bureau of the Budget and on the Corps’ inactive list.

It was the decisive moment.

“Further questions by the Chief of Engineers on engineering and costs were useless,” the Corps’ official Southwestern Division history reports. “Congress had declared its intention to build the waterway, and the Corps of Engineers had to comply.”¹⁸



Will Rogers’ home was moved out of the Oologah Lake area.

I was born in my father’s ranch house halfway between Claremore and Oologah. I usually say I was born in Claremore for convenience, because nobody but an Indian can pronounce Oologah.

— Will Rogers